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THE TWO FACES OF POLITICAL INSTABILITY

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The analysis of political instability, and the collection of information on it, have become major missions of US intelligence. Instability that catches policymakers by surprise is apt to be labeled—perhaps publicly—as an "intelligence failure." An agreed definition of political instability, however, has been slow to emerge. Nor is there a clear and widely accepted concept of exactly what the intelligence community should do to prepare the policymaker better.

These conceptual shortcomings exist partly because political instability is a relatively untraditional intelligence topic in which friends and foes may be difficult to identify, the arenas of action frequently shift, and the US interests at stake often are latent rather than overt. It has grown in importance along with the growth of the post-World War II, post-colonial Third World. In the United States, it has received additional attention since the searing experience of the Iranian revolution of 1979 and the subsequent hostage crisis.[1]

The conceptual difficulties also reflect some general problems—chiefly concerning how analysts set priorities, cope with uncertainty, and communicate that uncertainty to the consumer—that apply not only to instability but also to other intelligence topics. This essay discusses several of those problems and how they help to make political instability a difficult subject. But first, exactly what is the subject?

Instability as Potential

Instability is a clear concept when used in a mechanical or physical sense. An overloaded vehicle is unstable if a small disturbance (such as hitting a bump in the road) has the potential to trigger a sudden, major change (the vehicle overturns). The term is often used in the same way to describe certain military, economic, and diplomatic situations. The nuclear balance between the superpowers, for example, is usually described as stable or unstable depending on whether one believes that a single mistake such as an accidental nuclear detonation (i.e., a small disturbance) is apt to touch off a nuclear war (a sudden, major change).

Similarly, political instability is the potential for—or probability of—sudden, major change in a country's politics. The small disturbance that triggers the change may be an assassin's bullet, the emergence of a charismatic opposition leader, the luck of a coup-plotting cabal, or an additional economic hardship that becomes the last straw for a disaffected populace. The major change may be the overthrow of a regime by coup or revolution, but it might also be a sharp policy reversal by a ruler who stays in power.

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[1] George Caldwell, "The Mob Is in the Streets," *Studies in Intelligence,* Winter 1985, 33-40.

The analysis of political instability, insofar as it involves the *potential* for change, is not primarily a matter of predicting individual events. If intelligence can provide warning of a coup or other event that may lead to bigger political changes, so much the better. But in most instances, US intelligence lacks such specific information, or the sources that can provide it. The great, vexing questions for most political analysts—particularly those who monitor Third World countries—hinge on events that are unknowable for most practical purposes: whether the gunman recruited to assassinate a head of state will shoot straight; whether the next military officer to join a coup plot will be the one to betray the plan; whether it will rain hard enough to douse a riot on the day a government raises food prices. It is theoretically possible to predict such specific outcomes, just as it is theoretically possible to predict the outcome of a roll of dice (by noting the position of the dots when the player picks up the dice and observing how he shakes them, the angle of his hand when he throws them, etc.) but it usually is futile to try. A more worthwhile use of our inherently limited capacity to gather and process information is to understand the characteristics of the system that will generate the outcome (Are those dice crooked? Is that government shaky?) and to estimate the probabilities of different possible results.

Intelligence analysts who cover other kinds of accounts also occasionally must worry about potential big events depending on unpredictable small ones. Military conflicts, for example, sometimes are unstable in that a small turn of events can shift the momentum of a war (just as loss of the proverbial nail meant the loss of shoe, horse, rider, and battle). But political analysts who cover unstable Third World countries probably face this problem more often than any of their colleagues. On the central questions of who will rule these countries and what the rulers' policies will be, the political analyst may find it easy to be generally right most of the time (by predicting continuity, because on most days most governments don't fall or overhaul their policies). He or she is more vulnerable, however, to the intelligence "failure" of being way off the mark when a sudden, major change does occur.

Actually, not predicting such an event should not be regarded as a "failure," as long as the mission of intelligence in such situations is understood to be the assessment of instability, and instability is defined as potential. By this view, the track record of an analyst or an agency in covering instability can be judged not by a few specific predictions but only over a long period, by looking at how estimates of instability generally compare with the frequency and type of subsequent political change.

To say this is not to dodge responsibility or to rationalize mistakes. Policymakers frequently have to cope with uncertainty, on domestic as well as foreign issues, by hedging their bets. In the case of political instability in foreign countries, bets tend to be difficult to hedge because often the possible scenarios are drastically different from each other and the ways of coping with them are incompatible. A close relationship with an incumbent regime, for example, may lessen the chance for good relations with an opposition group, and thus for US influence in the country should that group gain power. But this problem reflects the nature of the subject matter, not a failure of intelligence.

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Indeed, intelligence ill serves the policymaker by offering specific predictions in the face of uncertainty. For one thing, this conveys a false sense of confidence and fails to alert the policymaker to the need to hedge bets, or at least to try to hedge them. For another, it obscures what may be important judgments about changing probabilities of potential events. If the chance that a government will fall this year has gone from 10 to 30 percent, that is an important development, but the best specific prediction would still be that it will not fall. Finally, ungrounded specific predictions—some of which inevitably will be wrong—reduce confidence in, and reliance on, intelligence over the long term.

Instability as Commotion

The concept of potential for change is clear enough, but users of the term "political instability" often seem to have something else in mind. Intelligence publications contain numerous references to the "potential for instability" in a given country or the "prospects" for a government to be stable or unstable. If instability is itself a type of potential, such phrases are redundant if not nonsensical. They raise more than a semantic or grammatical point, however; they point to a different concept of political instability.

That concept includes the idea of possible major political change (and more specifically, irregular or extra-legal change) but also includes actual events such as demonstrations, strikes, riots, issuance of manifestoes, military states of alert, the emergence of hitherto underground opposition groups, and increasingly vocal demands for a government to quit. What these events have in common is that they are overt, they get attention, and they seem to indicate, correctly or not, that the regime's grasp on power is weakening.

This kind of commotion is often an important subject for US intelligence, for several reasons. If nothing else, civil unrest affects the climate for business, including US-owned business. Moreover, even if a regime stays in power, its response to unrest may entail costs to itself and affect its image abroad and its relationship with the United States (e.g., when a crackdown violates human rights). Most important, these kinds of disturbances sometimes really are precursors to coups, revolutions, or other types of major political change, either because they reflect broader discontent or because they galvanize opposition groups into action.

Instability-as-commotion is probably closer to most people's notion of political instability than is the concept of potential for change. For intelligence to focus narrowly on it, however, entails drawbacks. By itself, political unrest is only an imperfect indicator of the probability of major political change. The level of "normal" unrest is an aspect of political culture that varies greatly from one country to another, even within the Third World. It also depends on what the regime does to contain it. Repression by a justifiably fearful government may keep unrest low in a country where the chance of major change is high (e.g., South Africa until the disturbances in recent years, or possibly Iraq today). Conversely, a resilient democracy can also afford to be relatively rambunctious (e.g., Israel, or any of a number of Western developed countries).

Overt unrest is especially unreliable as an indicator of major political changes that do not entail the fall of a regime. Regimes sometimes revamp their

policies precisely to avoid such unrest—and to stay in power. For example, the Iranian revolution has been the most dramatic consequence of the past decade's resurgence of Islamic fundamentalism, but otherwise the main political impact of this resurgence has been the preemptive incorporation of fundamentalist tenets into official policy (as in Pakistan). The impact on how the government of an Islamic country does business with the United States may be significant, even if it is the same government. Where coups and military rule have been the norm (as in much of Latin America), the greatest potential for major change (and thus the biggest political story to which intelligence can alert the policymaker) occurs where unrest sufficient to bring back the generals does *not* break out and a civilian government takes power constitutionally.

Two Ways to Serve the Policymaker

Which type of instability should intelligence officers monitor, study, and write about? The short, and generally correct, answer is "both." Resources for analysis and collection are limited, however. Moreover, the number of judgments that intelligence can present to policymakers, highlight as being important, and expect policymakers to absorb is also limited. A focus on unrest and other overt behavior thus might mean inadequate attention given to other, less visible but still important, developments.

This raises the larger question of how much emphasis intelligence should give to topics already on the policymaker's agenda, versus forcing the agenda by emphasizing other issues that analysts believe may ultimately have greater impact on US interests. Instability-as-commotion, when it breaks out in an even moderately important pro-US country, will definitely be on the policymaker's agenda. It will probably receive attention in the press and in Congress. Consumers of intelligence in the executive branch will necessarily give it attention as well. For intelligence not to have forecast the unrest that causes such attention would commonly be regarded as an intelligence "failure." In contrast, important changes occurring underneath the surface of a country's political and social fabric will not automatically get on the policymaking agenda, simply because they are less visible and the policymaker is not forced to react to them.

To cover both types of instability adequately, intelligence officers need to make a more conscious effort to study the potential for change than they do to report on commotion and unrest. Because instability-as-commotion will be on the policymaker's agenda, it will necessarily be on the intelligence community's list of tasks as well. Instability-as-potential, in contrast, needs special care and feeding as an intelligence topic. This is not necessarily a matter of telling policymakers what they don't want to hear. Commotion in foreign countries often is bad news for US policy. Conversely, a potential for change may be good news (in a country currently unfriendly to the US). Even when the main news is not good, as long as the issue is the *potential* for change there may still be an opportunity for US policymakers—guided by US intelligence—to do something about it, such as by shoring up a friendly regime or by cultivating opposition movements in the hope that a new regime will be friendly as well.

Challenges in Studying Instability

In addition to conceptual confusion, there are several other challenges in covering political instability. One is the extraordinary range of expertise required to make sound judgments of instability in a foreign country. It is difficult enough to assemble the right mixture of backgrounds and specialties in a group of analysts to monitor instability in country X; it is even more difficult to find such breadth of knowledge in an individual analyst (and judgments are ultimately made by individuals, albeit subject to review by other individuals). The study of instability is profoundly *interdisciplinary*. The judgments involved concern political developments, but economic, military, and sociological factors typically are critical ingredients. The most destabilizing factor in many Third World countries today is economic scarcity, together with the quandary of how to put an economy back on track without alienating the populace through harsh austerity measures. In many of these same countries, the most likely alternative rulers are in the military, making an understanding of military morale, and the effect on it of war or insurgency, another key to assessing instability.

Judgments about political instability also require both familiarity with a specific country and broader knowledge about patterns of political change across many countries. On one hand, the assessment of instability is partly an intuitive process in which there is no substitute for an intimate, longstanding, seat-of-the-pants feel for country X and its political culture. On the other hand, certain patterns of loss of legitimacy, rise of opposition movements, and revolutionary political change have recurred through history in different countries. Social scientists have studied these patterns and generalized about them. The generalizations are imperfect, but they contain some useful insights and lessons. The trick for the analyst is to exploit the lessons while remembering that each case will be different, probably in some important ways, from any previous one.

A further difficulty is how to deal with uncertainty, and specifically uncertainty about possible events—namely, the overthrow of governments—that are unlikely but potentially very significant for US interests. In some cases, intelligence officers may hesitate to "make the call" that a regime is likely to fall, because the fall of a regime is a rare event, or at least rarer than the continuation of a regime in office for another day. Probably in more cases, however, there will be a bias in the opposite direction (i.e., toward crying "wolf"), because of the intelligence officer's awareness that not to predict a revolutionary change that does occur would be regarded as a bigger intelligence "failure" than to warn repeatedly of one that does not. Rotation of intelligence officers from one assignment to another encourages this latter bias; none of them wants to be accused of being caught by surprise as country X is "lost" on their watch; they are less likely to be concerned about the long-term effect on an intelligence agency's credibility if it cries "wolf" too often.

In addition to these analytical biases, there is the problem of communicating uncertainty to the policymaker and of choosing the right message to emphasize when describing an uncertain, unstable situation. Does one need to stress that the government of Ruritania, although it will probably retain power,

has a significant chance of falling? Or does the policymaker need instead to be reminded that a continuation of the current Ruritanian government is still the most likely scenario? To answer such questions, intelligence analysts need to study their consumers—and their biases and blind spots—as closely as they study the countries they are responsible for monitoring.

An additional challenge in covering political instability is deciding how much coverage to give to individual countries. How collection and analytical resources should be distributed depends not only on the current importance of each country but also on how important each one might become if it underwent a major political political change. This is a difficult calculation. A nation's size, resources, and location determine its importance to some degree, regardless of who governs it. Qadhafi, for example, has been able to make so much trouble and get so much attention partly because of Libya's oil, which was known even before Qadhafi came along. But what about, say, Castro's Cuba? It lacks a comparable resource, and even its location close to US shores has not—since the missile crisis of 1962—been the principal reason it has commanded so much of the US government's attention. Cuba's intrinsic, permanent characteristics, in other words, would have been insufficient grounds—given what was known in the 1950s—to divert a large amount of resources from other topics to study the stability of the Batista regime.

Cuba illustrates how the dynamics of a revolution (and a revolutionary regime's internal political needs that are served by, for example, sending troops to fight in guerilla wars overseas) can *make* a country an important intelligence target. It also demonstrates how the importance to US policymakers of political change depends heavily on what kind of relationship a new regime strikes up with the USSR. This, in turn, is apt to depend less on the permanent characteristics of the given country than on such harder-to-calculate factors as the prejudices and cultural affinities of the new regime's leadership, the number of other revolutionary opportunities that open up to the Soviets elsewhere, and how the Soviets apportion their resources as they try to bolster or nurture clients in return for military access rights or other concessions.

US intelligence's coverage of political instability must incorporate a global view, both because the problem is, to a degree, part of a worldwide US-Soviet game and because different analysts have different ways of expressing uncertainty. *The Political Instability Quarterly*, which CIA's Directorate of Intelligence initiated in 1983, helps to provide such a global view. As a compendium of separate judgments by country analysts, however, it is designed more to trace changes in individual countries than to make cross-national comparisons. A more direct effort to make such comparisons and to measure instability in a large number of countries with a single yardstick has been NIE 7-81 [2] and its successor Estimates. Such worldwide, comparative assessments are audacious in scope and difficult to produce, but they probably are the best basis yet for establishing priorities and distributing resources for monitoring instability.

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[2] *Political Instability and Regional Tensions*, 14 September 1981.

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Doing Even Better

The intelligence community, and CIA in particular, have made substantial progress over the last several years in studying political instability.[3] The topic's relatively recent recogition as a distinct and important subset of intelligence problems (even though it has actually been an intelligence problem, under different labels, for much longer) has a lot to do with this. In striving for still more progress, the following points bear emphasis.

First, both kinds of relevant expertise—detailed knowledge of a single country and broad understanding of cross-national patterns of political change—need nurturing. Just as important, the two types of experts need to communicate with each other well enough to exploit fully each other's insights.

Second, analysts and collectors need to look at a wide variety of indicators of potential change, including ones that have nothing to do with instability-as-commotion. *The Political Instability Quarterly* has already done a major service in this regard.

Third, intelligence officers need to be precise as to which type of instability they are talking about. The policymaker is apt to be interested in both commotion and the potential for change. To warn of one type of instability carries a different message, however, with different policy implications, than to warn of the other type.

Finally, intelligence officers need to be frank about their inability to prophesy the specific events that will trigger major political changes. Consumers of intelligence have always preferred certainty to uncertainty and always will. But intelligence is not crystal-ball-gazing, and consumers should be reminded often of how what we don't know can hurt us.

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